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The Values of English Universities: Questioning the Role of Value Statements and Mapping their Current Focus

Universities now routinely promote value statements in order to express their beliefs and moral principles – adopting the practice of many commercial organisations. However, such value statements have rarely been collated or studied across the sector, which is what this paper sets out to do. Focusing on English universities, current value statements were collected and thematically analysed in order to assess what values universities in England claim to embrace; whether there are patterns in these value statements; and how these values are used to characterise the ‘business’ of higher education. A small number of key themes are used to typify value statements across a majority of institutions and differences between sub-groups of universities are identified. The paper concludes by questioning why universities adopt and publicise value statements and what role they might play in universities’ projections of themselves.

Keywords: values, liberal, academic, economic, education market.

Introduction

For over twenty years universities have published mission statements (Davies and Glaister 1996) to outline their purpose, strategy, behaviour standards and values – an approach derived from business, managerial and organisational studies (Drucker 1973; Campbell 1996). Such an approach can be seen as symptomatic of the corporatization of higher education (Neary and Winn 2009) and the move towards the marketization of the sector (Bok 2009) that has dominated the debate, particularly in the UK (Brown 2015).

This paper investigates a variant of these ubiquitous mission statements in English universities (Sauntson and Morrish 2010) – namely the explicit value statements that universities declare that they adhere to – ‘the beliefs and moral principles that lie behind the company’s [sic] culture’ (Campbell 1996, 10). An internet search reveals that a large number of universities in England have dedicated webpages

proclaiming their values which provided the initial source of data. As such, given their widespread nature, this paper set out to understand what the key values are across the sector: which areas receive most focus and are common, but also to understand whether there are significant differences between universities' sets of values (e.g. by comparing institution types), particularly given Huisman and Mampaey's research into university welcome addresses, which found that 'universities in different positions in the UK higher education system (defined by age and prestige) use different styles' in projecting their image (2016, 511).

Padaki declared that an organisation's values were the 'core convictions' that it translated into 'relatively enduring practice' (2000, 420) – although beyond the direct remit of this paper, I will question to what extent the value statements professed by universities can be seen to meet such criteria. I do not argue that the explicit setting-out of the values which a university holds and seeks to embody is necessarily a bad thing; so long as the value statements that proliferate across university websites and prospectuses are genuinely reflected in their institutions' actions and wider policy priorities. Values are about providing the moral rationale for decisions (Campbell 1996) and as such arguably provide a counterpoint to the notion of universities as actors in a market/quasi-market driven by commercial interests. Nonetheless, this paper takes a critical realist stance (Sayer 1992) to conceptualise the projections that universities make and to surmise the underlying reasoning behind the adoption, implementation and advertisement of value statements at English higher education institutions.

Context

In their work on organisational values in higher education, Kleijnen et al. describe values as 'one of the most powerful and stable forces that influence an organisation's performance and strategic success' (2009, 235). They cite work during the 2000s by the

European Universities Association which argued that the adoption of shared values was a key element in the enhancement of educational quality (EUA 2006). Although universities in England are inherently value-laden, dating back to their foundation, the very public expression of these values, and the specific nature of them, owe their roots to more recent history. The Further and Higher Education Act 1992 fundamentally changed the sector in England – creating a wave of new universities and further accelerating the drive towards mass higher education that was originally precipitated by the Robbins Report of 1963 (Bathmaker 2003). Subsequent changes to funding arrangements and the introduction of tuition fees in the country have led to the so-called marketization of higher education (Brown 2015) forcing universities down the inevitable route of academic capitalism according to Sauntson and Morrish (2010). The ‘clear links between capitalism, neo-liberalism and managerialism’ are manifested in the mission and value statements that are now so widespread (Sauntson and Morrish 2010, 74).

According to Macfarlane (2017), there are distinct ‘sets’ of values which can be identified – one such grouping are the academic or ‘liberal’ values that are often traditionally associated with higher education institutions. Such values were laid out in the Dearing Report which described the following ‘shared’ list of values as vital:

- A commitment to the pursuit of truth;
- A responsibility to share knowledge;
- Freedom of thought and expression;
- Analysing evidence rigorously and using reasoned argument to reach a conclusion;
- A willingness to listen to alternative views and judge them on their merits;
- Taking account of how one's own arguments will be perceived by others;

- A commitment to consider the ethical implications of different findings or practices

(National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education 1997, 79).

Such statements are often traditionally associated with higher education and echo the sentiments in John Masfield's influential speech at the installation of the Chancellor of Sheffield University:

It is a place where those who hate ignorance may strive to know, where those who perceive truth may strive to make others see; where seekers and learners alike, banded together in the search for knowledge, will honour thought in all its finer ways, will welcome thinkers in distress or in exile, will uphold ever the dignity of thought and learning and will exact standards in these things (Masfield 1946).

However, at least partly in response to the introduction of tuition fees following Dearing (and the shift towards marketization of higher education in England) a different set of values became prevalent, which Macfarlane described as 'business' (1998) or 'market' values (2017). Aspara et al. suggest that universities have alternated between 'terminal values of knowledge and truth defined by the academic community itself' and 'an alternative focus on instrumental information and value created for external parties' (2014, 524). Although referring to education more broadly, Pring has also written about the idea of a clash of values between 'on the one hand, importance attached to liberal values, protected within an independent academic tradition, and, on the other, a shift from producer dominated control of what should be learnt to that of the consumer, or, indeed, of government' (1996, 105). This move was ascribed by Telford and Masson to the 'quality assurance regime based upon customer satisfaction and externally set standards' (2005, 107-8). The adoption of market values represented 'a shift from a collective world in which independent and critical thought was valued, to a collective

world in which universities are expected to fulfil not these values but those of the marketplace and the economy’ (Evans 2004, 3); and Ball argued that the very concept of values (which we can take to mean the liberal or academic values) had been replaced with the singular notion of ‘value’ (2003, 217).

Gradually over the past 20 years universities have moved towards a system of ‘centralised decentralisation’ which has led to ‘new roles at the centre’ – largely populated by administrators and occupational groups ‘other than academics’ (Henkel 1997, 137). This has meant that mission and value statements are inevitably created by management teams and not by academics. As Macfarlane noted in 2005, academic staff often withdraw from many of the decision-making arenas, meaning that the move away from liberal to market values happens concurrently to the corporatization or bureaucratization of higher education. McNay’s fears that ‘the operational values embedded through bureaucratic processes in a corporate culture will dominate over the normative values of the academic staff’ (2007, 49) have become a reality.

HEFCE (the Higher Education Funding Council for England – a non-departmental government body which distributes funding to universities in England) takes a view that mission and value statements can act as an accountability tool – allowing universities ‘to demonstrate more broadly the value they provide’ (HEFCE 2017a, 34). This accountability function was made ever more relevant with the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in 2016/17 which sought to grade the quality of teaching in UK universities. In the DfE’s guidance for providers they noted that universities could submit:

Any additional context that explains its mission and characteristics that is not fully captured by the standardised contextual data outlined in the Contextual data and metrics section. This could include aspects such as mission, collaborative provision or knowledge exchange activity (DfE 2016, 41).

The DfE encouraged universities to provide explicit statements of their mission in order to support the judging process. Whether for purposes of accountability or to better connect with stakeholders, mission and value statements are essentially performative in nature and represent what Henkel describes as universities' incorporation 'into national drives for efficiency and productivity that have triggered the adoption of new public management in other public sector organisations' (Henkel 1997, 135). Davies and Glaister questioned whether the seemingly necessary adoption of such statements was seen by universities as a chance to develop a genuine sense of purpose or whether it was in reality driven by these external requirements (1996).

Existing research into (specifically) the explicit values of universities is somewhat limited, at least in England. Altıntaş and Kavurmaci conducted a similar study of value statements from Turkish universities which found that academic freedom and research were particularly prevalent across the institutions they looked at (2018, 310) – suggesting that liberal values remain important in Turkey, although moral-ethical statements were the most common (relating to issues of human rights, respect and diversity) – crossing into what Macfarlane describes as 'social(ist) values' (2017).

While not identical in nature to value statements, there have been a number of studies carried out which have explored university mission statements. Sauntson and Morrish found that 'such a turn to capitalism (i.e. the marketization of English higher education) has consequences for the system of values held by most academics' (2010, 75) based upon their analysis of mission statements from 53 universities. They found that institutions were generally focused on the marketing and the brand of the university: 'we find these mission statements to be dominated by neo-liberal discourse which extols marketisation, commodification and globalisation' (Sauntson and Morrish 2010, 83). Davies and Glaister's somewhat older study (which nonetheless provides

context here) found that universities were severely lacking in their communication of their mission statements to either potential employees or to students, which they were highly critical of (1996, 276). Meanwhile, Morpew and Hartley have also been critical of educational institutions' adoption of mission statements:

Rather than surfacing values that might guide everyday decision making, colleges and universities fashion mission statements that maximize institutional flexibility. They communicate that nothing is beyond the reach of the organization in question. In doing so, they ignore institutional limitations and sidestep any effort at prioritizing current activities or future initiatives (Morpew and Hartley 2006, 458).

Kosmützky and Krücken's analysis of German universities' mission statements showed that institutions sought to differentiate themselves from their competitors through such statements, while relying on 'institutional specificities of universities (their historically and socially given tasks and missions)', which meant that there were nonetheless a significant number of shared characteristics across such statements (2015, 146).

Other research into organisational values has often focused on the perceptions of higher education staff and other stakeholders: Kleijnen et al.'s study of Dutch universities found that 'values ... vary substantially over departments and might be susceptible of structural/managerial influences' (2009, 245) and that there were significant differences between the 'current and preferred situation' (2009, 233). Meanwhile, McNay's largescale study of UK academics found that there were gaps between 'espoused policy and policy in practice, between stated aims and their achievement' (2007, 51). Indeed, there seems to be a disconnect in a multitude of areas when comparing values espoused institutionally and the experiences of staff, students and other stakeholders: Telford and Masson found 'there is no relationship between the congruence of quality values and student satisfaction' (2005, 117) and Skelton

suggested that ‘once we begin to teach in higher education ... we confront a social reality that precedes us, where our values meet those operating at micro, meso and macro levels of the system’ – and there might not necessarily be direct overlap (2012, 258). As noted by Kraatz, different stakeholders infuse universities with different values (2009) and universities inevitably embody more than one identity and purpose (Seeber et al. 2017). With respect to values statements as a form of branding, Aula et al. note the tension across stakeholder groups given that multiple players ‘represent different ideas of what the university is, what it should be, and how it needs to be branded’ (2015, 165). Ball highlighted the tension of higher education teachers who might feel that enforced elements of their practice compromise their own values:

A kind of values schizophrenia is experienced by individual teachers where commitment, judgement and authenticity within practice are sacrificed for impression and performance (Ball 2003, 212).

This study sought to build upon the work of Davies and Glaister (1996); Morphew and Hartley (2006); and Sauntson and Morrish (2010), amongst others, and assess what values universities in England claim to embrace; whether there are patterns in these value statements – both across the country and within subsets such as Russell Group institutions; and how these values are used to characterise the business of higher education.

Methodology

This paper employs a critical realist stance in order to underpin its approach (Sayer 1992) – focusing on the causal explanations behind universities’ adoption of value statements while accepting the fallibility of describing and analysing such social structures (e.g. Scott 2005). While, for instance, the academics at a university may hold some shared values, this paper will question the extent to which the organisational

management can capture such values. The analysis will focus on firstly describing what values/sets of values are shared or different across the sector, and then will critically explore the relationship between institution and knowledge, attempting to interpret the meaning of this very particular phenomenon.

Data collection

According to HEFCE there are 109 English universities and university colleges (HEFCE 2017b) which represented the sample for this project. A search of the websites (in August 2017) of all 109 universities identified 77 which had explicit values or principles listed (normally directly displayed on their webpages, but in some cases within annual reports or strategic plans that could be accessed through these pages). The remaining 32 universities did not directly mention values online and so were excluded from the research at this stage. The focal point for collecting data was on what universities declared their current values to be – and hence was not concerned with missions, visions, aims or priorities: the research was about what universities state their values to be and not what they intend to do in the future. In case of doubt, universities' own definitions were always used (i.e. when there were multiple lists or statements under different headings, those that the university in question described as 'values' were used). All relevant statements from each institution (in some cases up to 19 different statements) were copied and added to an Excel spreadsheet, which was then imported into NVivo 11.

Analysis

The analysis of the collected value statements was undertaken using standard qualitative analysis software NVivo 11. All value statements were coded against themes drawn

from the data itself, along similar lines to Morphew and Hartley's analysis of mission statements – focusing on key words and then on integral elements:

First, our analysis of these mission statements sometimes focused on significant single words, as well as phrases. Second, our goal in this analysis was to identify the integral pieces of each mission statement in such a way so that, if necessary, each statement could be reconstructed using only the pieces (or 'elements') that we identified (Morphew and Hartley 2006, 461).

Similarly, the process of identifying themes and elements (based on emergent coding) was adopted by Stemler and Bebell in their 1999 study of mission statements of educational institutions. Following this round of coding, references were checked against the full list of codes to ensure that they were correctly coded, and to subsequently refine and improve the list of themes (and in some cases consolidated or renamed). Simple descriptive statistics have been used to compare the value statements between different types of institutions (i.e. between Russell Group/non-Russell Group universities) and to identify patterns or trends within the data.

It is important to note that the data on which this research is based has come entirely from universities themselves. As such, analysis of the values that the universities adhere to should perhaps be more accurately described as analysis of the values that universities in England project and advertise. In keeping with the critical realist stance which I adhere to, the discussion section of this paper will consider the meaning of these projections and the inevitable fallibility of both universities own attempts to capture what values they adhere to, as well as our understanding of them.

Results and Analysis

After undertaking a thematic analysis of the corpus of value statements from English universities, five key, overarching, themes were identified – which can be seen

in Table 1. The names of these themes were largely based upon in vivo coding in the first instance, although they were expanded to include other examples (e.g. the ‘diversity and equal opportunities’ theme includes direct uses of the word ‘diversity’ but also includes examples of values which refer to ‘equality’ and ‘inclusion’).

<Table 1>

Theme 1: Excellence and Impact

As can be seen from Table 1, the most prevalent theme was that of excelling and having an impact. Fifty-five of the universities in the sample included values related to this concept, often expressed simply as aiming to be excellent:

We strive for excellence. (University of Bedfordshire)

Some institutions specified the areas in which they believed they excelled, citing both more traditional academic concerns and also referencing the concept of ‘service delivery’:

Excellence: We take pride in ensuring the highest quality standards of academic achievement and professional service delivery. (Birmingham City University)

We create world-class research and teaching. (Open University)

It was also common for universities to cite wider forms of impact that they valued:

Engaging actively to change the world, through our teaching and research and also by leading on economic and social improvement. (University of Lancaster)

Theme 2: Diversity and Equal Opportunities

The second most common theme across universities related to issues of diversity, inclusion and equality. Again, around two thirds of institutions referred to these principles of EDI:

Respect each other and celebrate our diversity. (Loughborough University)

Valuing the rights, responsibilities and dignity of individuals through our commitment to equality and diversity. (University of Keele)

Celebrating diversity and being committed to equality of opportunity and treatment in our staff and student community. (University of Lancaster)

Theme 3: Community and Support

This theme generally referred to universities valuing the creation and development of a community amongst their own staff and students. In the majority of cases references to community did not speak to wider communities and groups (which was instead captured under the below theme of collaboration and partnership). Around three fifths of universities expressed this value, often along with the explicit provision of support:

We support people: Together, we create a nurturing environment for our students and employees. (Arden University)

Our friendly, inclusive and professional community of students and staff.
(Canterbury Christ Church University)

All our staff work to create a supportive community that is built upon relationships.
(University of Chichester)

Community: We support and inspire each other to be the best that we can be.
(University of Exeter)

Theme 4: Collaboration and Partnership

Alongside the internal development of a community, when referencing the range of stakeholders involved in higher education, many universities cited collaboration and partnership as one of their values: often with business and employers, and often located within the region in which the university was located:

We work collaboratively. In partnership with our students, communities and business we innovate in tackling shared challenges. (University of Bedfordshire)

Partnership is at the core of who we are. Through partnership we create distinctive educational programmes, we share and disseminate our research and enterprise and

we create mutual benefit to our city, our region and globally. (University of Brighton)

We will work in partnership with our collaborators to ensure their interests and aspirations inform our activities. (University of Liverpool)

Theme 5: Innovation and Creativity

The final significant theme, present in around half of the sample, was that of innovation and creativity. The two terms were commonly used together:

Innovation: We will apply our collective and individual creativity to conceive and develop new ideas, implementing them for the benefit of the communities we serve. (Anglia Ruskin University)

Nurturing creativity is key to ensuring we continue to grow and develop our activities. We're committed to creating new, radical and exciting opportunities for our students, staff and community. We recognise the scale of the challenges we face as an institution, society and world and place value on tackling these in creative and innovative ways. (University of Brighton)

Our strongest roots lie in being innovative and creative. By applying these principles across all that we do, we enable our staff, students and graduates to succeed in a dynamic and turbulent environment. (De Montfort University)

Word Frequency

In addition to the thematic analysis of university values, a word frequency query was also executed in order to help triangulate the key terms/themes, with the 20 most common words across the corpus outlined in Table 2. As this list shows, in general the majority of words support the thematic analysis, with 'community', 'excellence', 'support', 'diversity', 'inclusivity' and 'innovate' all featuring prominently.

<Table 2>

Institutional Comparisons

The sample of 77 universities that had explicit value statements on their websites can be divided in at least two ways. Firstly 12 of the universities are part of the Russell Group

(a leading group of UK universities); secondly 28 of the universities were established prior to 1992 (when the Further and Higher Education Act allowed for the establishment of a host of new universities), 49 were re-designated as universities or established from 1992 onwards. Table 3 shows the number of universities with values that were categorised against the themes of academic freedom, research and a global outlook.

<Table 3>

As can be seen from Table 3, Russell Group universities were much more likely to include academic freedom and research as particular focal points in their value statements – this aligns with the Russell Groups’ description of their collective commitment ‘to maintaining the very best research’ (<http://russellgroup.ac.uk/about/>).

Five of the 12 Russell Group universities sampled referenced academic freedom and independence of thought (42 percent of the sample) in contrast to 22 percent of the sample of other universities:

We will be an independent and autonomous organisation that will work to uphold rigorously the principles of freedom of thought and speech. (University of Manchester)

We support academic freedom and autonomy and we promote open academic debate and discussion. (University of York)

Similarly, research was a key factor for both Russell Group universities and also the older (i.e. pre-1992) universities sampled. These older universities often referred to research and teaching within the same statement:

We create world-class research and teaching. (The Open University)

In contrast, at newer universities research was often talked about independently – few value statements explicitly referenced teaching alongside research or the concept of research-led teaching:

A commitment to extend the boundaries of knowledge and understanding by
conducting strategic and applied research. (Harper Adams University)
Our commitment to scholarship and research. (York St John University)

Furthermore, older universities and Russell Group universities in particular were far
more likely to reference a global outlook to their activities and in their values (see Table
3):

Take an international view across all our activities. (University of Nottingham)
Are globally ambitious and regionally rooted. (University of Newcastle)
Global perspective – our cosmopolitan outlook and identity enrich our thinking and
inform our quest for global relevance and world-class impact. (University of
Warwick)

Table 4 shows themes related specifically to students and the difference between pre-
1992 universities, those re-designated in 1992 (often former polytechnics which gained
university status upon the passing of the Further and Higher Education Act) and
universities which have been established more recently.

<Table 4>

The three themes outlined in Table 4, but particularly personal development, are more
likely to be exhibited by the newer universities:

The development of the whole person, respecting and nurturing the inherent
dignity and potential of each individual. (Canterbury Christ Church University)
We promise to treat you as individuals, not just as numbers. (Bath Spa University)
Individuals matter: The wellbeing of individuals is important, as are their opinions
and views. (University of Winchester)

Finally, Table 5 shows a theme that did not occur regularly – that of social justice – but
which shows a distinct difference between Russell Group universities, none of which

mentioned this factor in their values, and other universities: of which seven did make explicit reference to the concept.

We seek to embody social justice and develop our students as effective and fulfilled global citizens. (University of Winchester)

<Table 5>

Haidt argues that universities must choose one inviolable purpose – truth or social justice (2016), which may explain the distinction between a group of newer universities valuing the principle of social justice, in contrast to a cohort of the older institutions favouring academic freedom.

Discussion

This paper sought to map the values that universities in England claim to have, as well as questioning what such value statements are for. The publication of such statements online suggests they may be, at least in part, a marketing exercise: a way of selling an institution to prospective students, partners, or employers, what Gibbs refers to as the marketing-isation of universities (2017). Although somewhat out of date, research by Davies and Glaister found that universities in 1996 generally did not communicate their values well to their staff or (through their mission statements) ‘express any concern for employees’ (1996, 285) – again, perhaps because they were not the intended audience. It could be argued that this process of marketing-isation has led to the inevitable position where universities’ own professed values are little more than a marketing exercise. This outcome is clearly as a result of the marketization of the sector in England, precipitated through policy and legislative changes. Although a somewhat cynical view, this aligns with what Kuenssberg describes as the adoption of ‘a market approach in search of alternative sources of income’ (2011, 279) and the

professionalization of management to become more ‘business-like’ – while simultaneously shifting towards the treatment of students as consumers (Connell and Galasinski 1998, 457-8).

Looking at the specific themes that occurred most frequently across the whole body of value statements, it is perhaps not surprising to see that being excellent was the most common. Similarly, the next most common theme, that of diversity and providing equal opportunities, allows universities to demonstrate their accessibility and openness. These two qualities of excellence and accessibility mirror exactly the two most common characteristics of universities in Connell and Galasinski’s research of mission statements from UK universities (1998). While their research suggested older (pre-1992) institutions were likely to declare excellence, while newer universities proclaimed accessibility, in this study of values, there were no significant differences between these groups. Connell and Galasinski suggested that this split was down to the older institutions (through their tradition/longevity) having a greater history to draw upon and on which they might plausibly claim excellence, while newer institutions needed an alternative ‘way of asserting the possession of positive attributes’ (1998, 473). The more recent work of Seeber et al. found that, along with claims of accessibility, ‘universities of lower reputation now also make claims of competence, but at the same time highly reputed universities claim quality in a comparative – competitive way to preserve their distinctiveness’, suggesting that either:

Universities of lower reputation first started to claim competence and, as a response, universities of high reputation differentiated themselves by claiming quality in a competitive way. Or vice versa, universities of higher reputation adopted claims of competitive quality, hence leaving room for low reputed universities to claim competence. (Seeber et al. 2017, 10).

In addition, a number of reports from both academics and policymakers have emphasised a renewed focus on the importance and value of diversity and access in higher education (e.g. Caruana and Ploner 2010; Piatt 2011; Clark 2014) – suggesting that striving for accessibility is no longer the poor relation of achieving excellence. Bowl et al.’s work hypothesised that because of demands made by OFFA all universities would acquiesce to the widening participation agenda in their public outputs and indeed found this to be the case in their study of university access agreements (2016, 283).

In their short paper from 2011, Gosling and Gower suggest that ‘communalism – the idea that knowledge is a product of social collaboration and belongs to the community’ is one of the fundamental institutional values of higher education (67), as such it could be argued that the other common themes of community, support, collaboration and partnership all align with this more traditional academic value. However, equally, the provision of a supportive community; a collaborative environment; and the opportunity to engage with external stakeholders (in particular employers) are all desirable traits that current students look for from higher education (UUK, 2017). It would be wrong to pursue the idea that value statements serve only one purpose and indeed there are likely to be a multiplicity of intended and hoped for outcomes, envisaged by institutions. As such, rather than a dichotomy of explanations for the inclusion of certain themes, I would instead suggest that these causal explanations are potentially compatible.

Indeed, different institutions may utilise value statements in different ways, at least partly evidenced through the institutional differences found in this research. Older universities (including the Russell Group institutions) have been shown to undertake higher levels of research activity, which perhaps explains why these universities focus

on research as part of their values (Boliver, 2015). In contrast many newer universities prioritise teaching – related to the former roles of many as polytechnics: which often had a focus on professional and vocational courses. This aligns with the findings of Davies and Glaister:

A greater teaching emphasis in about thirty-two per cent of the mission statements (twenty-two in total) with most of these mission statements coming from the ‘new’ universities. Only about three per cent of the mission statements emphasised research more than teaching (two in total) these being mission statements from the ‘old’ universities (Davies and Glaister, 1996, 283).

Interestingly Sauntson and Morrish found that ‘research is a frequent item in all groups’ (2010, 78) which was not a finding replicated in this study, however, this could be because research (and, similarly, teaching) is seen as an activity undertaken and not directly as a ‘value’ (and thus can be more appropriately mentioned within a mission statement as opposed to a set of values). In terms of the global outlook, largely emphasised by the Russell Group universities, this does echo Sauntson and Morrish: ‘a key concern of Russell Group universities is proving that they are world leading’ (2010, 79). In general Russell Group institutions take a disproportionately large number of international students when compared to other institutions in the UK (on average 22 percent of undergraduates at Russell Group universities are international, compared with 13 percent at other institutions (HESA 2016)) – which could explain why their global outlook is so important.

Meanwhile, the newer universities sampled seemed to place a greater emphasis on personal development, wellbeing and the individuality of students. Again, this may, at least in part, relate to the fact post-1992 universities previously often had a vocational or technical focus, and hence employability was (and remains) a key outcome for them. In the quasi-market of higher education – where fees for all courses are essentially the

same – Russell Group universities have a perceived reputational advantage over newer institutions (Boliver 2015). Hence, newer universities need to find a way to compete and, by focusing on areas such as student wellbeing and development, may have found a key way to differentiate themselves.

While different university groups have adopted some distinct sets of values, and while there are others that seem to be shared by a majority of institutions, there still remains the question of what such published statements are truly for. It could be argued that their very public nature marks out such value statements as little more than virtue signalling (Peterson, 2016). Alternatively it could be claimed that they provide a form of accountability – a way of showing bodies such as HEFCE or the Office for Students that they are doing the ‘right’ things in order to gain a better ranking or grade on exercises such as the TEF. Aspara et al. note that the essence of a university’s brand, embodied through public outputs including value statements, ‘signifies to various stakeholders both what value and resources the actor has to offer to the stakeholder and what value and resources the stakeholders themselves are expected to offer in exchange’ (2014, 545). Meanwhile Schlesinger et al. emphasised that if these statements express shared values, between the institution and its alumni, they can increase loyalty amongst this group in particular: ‘if graduates share values and ideals with their universities, they assess their universities’ image more positively’ (Schlesinger et al. 2016, 13) – which can lead to enhanced relationships with alumni – a reputationally and financially beneficial position for many universities.

Ultimately, in keeping with the critical realist framework which this paper is operating within, it is perhaps better to suggest that there is no one infallible causal explanation. Without properly studying what universities are actually doing – how their management, staff and students are actually behaving, it remains beyond the scope of

this paper to test whether their values are genuinely embodied across their organisations or whether they are hollow forms of marketing/virtue signalling/faux accountability; as Chapleo notes, ‘many universities are intrinsically similar in the “products” they offer and arguably their corporate brand, rather than product brands (NB individual courses) is their basis for real possible differentiation’ (2015).

Conclusions

By comparing and assessing the value statements of the 77 English universities that openly advertise having them, this paper has shown the key themes that higher education institutions in this country purport to value. It has presented some possible causal explanations, but is inevitably restricted by the fact that such value statements are only what a university projects as its values – there is no way, purely by studying this source of data, to truly know whether they actually embody them: whether they are the ‘core convictions’ that have become ‘enduring practice’ (Padaki 2000, 420) or whether they are more superficial than this conception.

As implied above, future research in this area should focus on comparing the values universities espouse with their actual actions. There is a wealth of available data on students, staff, funding, and research grants etc. around universities in this country which could be explored in relation to both the individual and collective (thematic) values of institutions. In addition, there is considerable scope for gathering the views of both the managers who create such value statements, and the academics and students asked to embody and live by them – particularly whether the latter groups feel that their institutions values represent what they do.

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All value statements included in this paper were taken from university websites and were publically available.

Table 1. Most common themes.

Theme	Number of universities (n=77)
Excellence and impact	55
Diversity and equal opportunities	51
Community and support	46
Collaboration and partnership	39
Innovation and creativity	37

Table 2. Most common words.

Word	Count	Similar Words
Students	97	student, students, students'
Community	68	communities, community
Staff	53	staff
Value	52	value, valued, values, valuing
Work	52	work, working
Excellence	48	excel, excellence, excellent
Support	44	support, supported, supporting, supportive, supports
Commitment	41	commitment, committed, committing
University	40	universities, university
Development	37	develop, developed, developing, development
Diversity	37	diverse, diversity
Respect	35	respect, respectful, respectfully, respecting, respective, respects
Activities	33	active, actively, activities, activity
Inclusivity	33	inclusion, inclusive, inclusiveness, inclusivity
Innovative	33	innovate, innovation, innovative, innovators
Academic	30	academic, academically
Research	30	research
Achieve	29	achieve, achieved, achievement, achievements, achieving
Creativity	29	creative, creatively, creativity
Learning	29	learn, learning

Table 3. Thematic comparison between old/new universities and Russell Group/non-Russell Group universities.

Theme	Universities established pre-1992 (n=28)	Universities established from 1992 onwards (n=49)	Russell Group universities (n=12)	All other universities (n=65)
Academic freedom	11	8	5	14
	39%	16%	42%	22%
Research	10	6	5	11
	36%	12%	42%	17%
Global	12	4	7	9
	43%	8%	58%	14%

Table 4. Thematic comparison between types of university.

Theme	Universities established pre-1992 (n=28)	Universities established in 1992 (n=25)	Universities established from 1992 onwards (n=24)
Personal development	3	4	9
	11%	16%	38%
Wellbeing	1	3	4
	4%	12%	17%
Individuality	3	2	7
	11%	8%	29%

Table 5. Thematic comparison between Russell Group/non-Russell Group universities.

Theme	Russell Group universities (n=12)	All other universities (n=65)
Social justice	0	7
	0%	9%